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# Satisfactory Progress? Keywords in English School Inspection

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## Abstract

In this paper, we explore some of the keywords around which the practice of school inspection is ordered in England. As part of a project that explores the role of inspection in governing schooling in England, Scotland and Sweden, we have examined some of the key sources through which Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) publicly announces its role and purpose. In considering these texts, we have turned to Raymond Williams' conception of "keywords" (1988) to frame our analysis. We suggest that these sources are marked by the presence of a series of such keywords that underpin and legitimise the practice of school inspection by Ofsted. We conclude by considering some of the changing terminology that followed from the Coalition Government that took office in the UK in 2010 and which made education reform a centrepiece of its first period in power.

*Keywords:* Keywords, accountability, inspection, improvement, independence, value for money, users, satisfactory

## Introducing *Keywords*

Our analysis starts from Raymond Williams' comments about how to approach the study of keywords and then takes up a series of words that appear central to the discourse of inspection in relation to Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education, Children, Skills and Families. Ofsted, the English inspectorate of schools, has been in existence since 1992. Introduced by a Conservative administration, Ofsted replaced the previous inspectorate – Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools. The new agency was intended to open up what had previously been referred to as 'the secret garden of education' by not only taking a far more regulatory approach to schools, but also making public the results of school inspections. In this way, they aimed to ensure that this was an inspectorate that could be thought of as what the then Prime Minister, John Major, called "The Parent's Friend", ensuring far greater levels of transparency within education in England (Major 1991). Since then, the agency has taken a central role in the creation and implementation of education policy (Ozga et al. 2013). A number of researchers argue that, far from being a quasi-autonomous agency whose duty is to report "without fear or favour" (Ofsted 2012b), it has increasingly operated in close proximity to government agendas. Since the inception of the Conservative/Liberal Coalition Government in 2010, these accusations have

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become increasingly critical of the apparent role of the inspectorate in enforcing the government's academy programme and ensuring that as many schools as possible convert to autonomous status in which they are financially and organisationally freed from Local Authority control (Baxter 2013; Baxter 2014, 2014a).

In many ways the terminology deployed by Ofsted has become normatively accepted as the means by which to describe successful and failing education in England. Since its inception, Ofsted has evaluated schools via a series of inspection frameworks; along with accompanying information handbooks, they have formed the basis for the definition and evaluation of successful schooling and the obverse (Baxter and Segerholm 2014). Successive frameworks have utilised many of the same terms such as Improvement, Progress, Accountability, Independence, Value-for-Money, and Users. However, we will suggest that the terms themselves have taken on new meanings and conveyed understandings that have evolved in line with emerging political and cultural conditions.

Our previous work on the shifting criteria of excellence and failure in English education (see Baxter 2013 and Baxter and Segerholm 2014) used a combination of critical discourse analysis and literary analysis to investigate the ways in which the inspectorate has diachronically shifted notions of excellence and failure according to political conditions. Within this research, we noted that not only had meanings changed, but individual words within standard documentation produced by the agency were used with very different cultural connotations from those that associated with earlier texts. It is with this mixture of cultural significance and changing meanings in mind that we turned to Raymond Williams' approach to the study of "keywords" (1988). Williams argued against the search for the 'true' or 'real' meaning of such words; instead, he suggested an approach through 'historical semantics' in which:

We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovations, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meanings (1988: 17).

We borrow this approach from Williams precisely for this sensitivity to the complex historical dynamics through which meanings are created, reproduced and transformed – even when the same word appears to persist. This enables us to understand the ways in which the earlier and later senses of particular words "coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested" (1988, 22). Equally importantly, Williams' view of keywords emphasised their socially performative and productive quality (before post-structuralist conceptions of language came to dominate social analysis). He argued

that “some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are. New kinds of relationships, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways ...” (1988, 22). This approach to meaning through keywords enables us to probe the ways in which schooling is grasped through inspection – how the terrain of places, people, processes and relationships is culturally mapped through authoritative official discourse.

Williams’ work offers an approach rather than a specific methodology or set of techniques. Instead, it implies immersion in texts and attention to their social, political and cultural contexts. For us it provides a guide to how to approach the challenge of making sense of the articulation of inspection at a specific time and place. As a result, the obvious and necessary starting point is the idea of Inspection itself. It condenses a long history in England, not just in the inspection of schooling but also in the variety of Inspectorates that were constructed during the Victorian reform and extension of state apparatuses (Her Majesty’s Inspectorates of constabulary, prisons and factories, for example, date from this period). It is interesting that Ofsted continues to reference this history: most visibly and symbolically in the terminology of Her Majesty’s Inspectors (and Chief Inspector) within the new governmental and organisational assemblage that is Ofsted. What is achieved by carrying forward the older terminology of HMIs into the new regime of an Office of Standards in Education? It is tempting to argue that there is an attempt to borrow or lay claim to a form of prestige, authority and legitimacy associated with the old HMI model, a model which employed a team of full-time, highly paid inspectors whose credibility emanated from their longstanding experience within the field of education (Maclure 2000). The business of inspection continues to be executed by ‘inspectors’; they are engaged on a freelance basis by three commercial organisations which operate in a contracting/partnership framework. Indeed, ‘partnership’ is itself another keyword of contemporary governance that rose to a position of particular prominence during the New Labour years (see, for example, Glendinning et al. 2002). The continuity of the idea of inspection (understood as a mode of governmental surveillance of schools) conceals some radical discontinuities in its organisation and practice, and also in the field of relationships in which it is situated. Put crudely, what was a professional exercise conducted within the world of schooling and involved advising governments on the basis of professional judgement has become an evaluative practice, exercised over schools, producing public judgements and classifications for a set of assumed non-governmental as well as governmental audiences (teachers, parents, pupils, local authorities, employers, sponsors, local communities: the field of potential ‘stakeholders’ – another public management keyword and one used by Ofsted itself). What does inspection now mean in the field of English schooling?

## Introducing Ofsted

Ofsted announces itself through the overarching image of “Raising standards, improving lives”: a statement that appears as part of the logo on all Ofsted documents. It is an interesting combination that links the business of ‘standards’ with a wider social purpose. In a 2009 document – “Who we are and what we do” –, Ofsted identifies itself as follows:

We seek to promote improvement in the services we inspect and regulate, and ensure that they focus on the interests of the children and young people, parents and carers, adult learners and employers who use them. We also encourage services to provide value for money. Ofsted puts children and learners first. We prize our independence and we report impartially (Ofsted 2009a, 2).

There are several points that might be drawn out here. First, Ofsted language is dominated by the discourse of progress or, more specifically, the new managerialist language of progress as continuous improvement in organisational performance. Second, Ofsted sees itself as speaking for, or acting on behalf of, the user/consumer of public service. Elsewhere we have written about the transformation of citizens/publics into users-as-consumers (e.g., Clarke 2007). There is also some interesting work by Daniel Miller on New Labour’s “Best Value” evaluation programme for local authorities that treats auditors/inspectors as ‘virtual consumers’ speaking in the name of the consumer (Miller 2005). Third, it is worth drawing attention to the insistence on Ofsted’s independence. This is the foundational claim for evaluative governmental institutions: “we prize our independence and we report impartially”. We will return below to questions about how this independence is understood: from what or whom are they independent? In relation to whom or what are they impartial? How is independence and impartiality materialised or embodied in practices and relationships? Before this question of independence, however, it is worth exploring more carefully how Ofsted aligns its organisational and social purposes:

We assess children’s services in local areas, and inspect services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection. About one in three people in England makes use of the services we inspect or regulate. This puts us in a position to make a difference to the lives of many millions of our fellow citizens, of all ages. It is a privilege and a great responsibility. All our work is directed towards fulfilling our purposes: serving children and learners, encouraging services to improve, and securing value for money. Inspection entails assessing a service against a published framework and criteria. It involves close observation by trained and experienced inspectors with knowledge of the sector concerned, informed by a range of data, and dialogue with staff and users of services. The output of inspection is normally the publication of judgements set out in a report (Ofsted 2009c, 2–3).

Here Ofsted articulates more fully the connections between raising standards and improving lives through the idea of “making a difference” to the lives of

“our fellow citizens”. These links are ordered around the ‘three purposes’ (also see the 2010 Ofsted Strategic Plan). The reference to “children and learners” presents a slightly narrower view of the users/beneficiaries of the services than elsewhere, and we will turn to the implications of both ‘improvement’ and ‘value for money’ in the following section. However, we think it is interesting that inspection – the process of direct observation and its grounding in the knowledge and experience of inspectors – is given precedence over data in this formulation of the work of Ofsted, particularly in the light of the growing availability and significance of performance data in the governance of education (see, for example, Ozga 2009; Ozga et al. 2011). Data is understood to inform the work of inspection but is not the core element. Finally, Ofsted also understands itself as having a role in the larger processes and relationships of governing schooling:

Improvement through inspection is one of our key objectives. We want to ensure inspection influences providers, but also policy thinking and policy making. Through our inspections, we gather a wealth of valuable and unique data and evidence in all areas of care and learning (Ofsted 2009c, 6).

## **Inspection and Improvement**

One way of thinking about the shifting meanings of inspection is to look at Ofsted’s own framing of the word: Ofsted performs inspection but it is framed by a series of objectives in which ‘improvement’ is the central term. Ofsted documents feature (at least) two meanings of improvement. One is the rhetorical gesture towards social purpose: *Raising standards, improving lives*. This double claim is not turned into any substantial discussion of what an improved life looks like or how it is to be assessed or evaluated beyond school performance. Instead, it is understood implicitly as the necessary corollary of raised educational standards. The more active and purposive sense of improvement in Ofsted discourse is in relation to organisational performance, which is itself relatively narrowly defined. Here it forms part of a linked series of terms and phrases: raising standards, progress, and enhancing, supporting and driving improvement.

This is a consistently new managerialist vision of progress in which organisations strive towards the goal of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is itself a phrase borrowed from studies of 1970s’ and 1980s’ Japanese industrial practices such as quality circles or Total Quality Management and rests on the idea that standards can be measurably specified and evaluated (see, for example, Kirkpatrick and Martinez-Lucio 1995). Improvement is also the focus of a still growing body of national and international research, advice and guidance on ‘school improvement’.

In Ofsted discourse, improvement relates primarily to the raising of standards of educational performance that are measurable and comparable, but it must also involve progress in the form of “value for money” and the “efficiency and effectiveness” of providers (as in the commitment to “reduce bureaucracy”). These are keywords in

their own right, deriving from the emergence of New Public Management during the 1980s (Clarke and Newman 1997). However, it is important to see how they are articulated by Ofsted into the mission of improvement. For example, in *Ofsted inspects* (Ofsted 2009b, 1), the stress is on how “consistent and coherent inspection and regulation methodologies” can:

- ensure that inspection focuses on key issues
- improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the provider
- make it easier for users to understand the outcomes of inspection, helping to drive improvement
- facilitate better inspection by removing duplication
- align inspection activities
- reduce bureaucracy
- provide value for money to users
- promote the principles of proportionality to ensure that resources are targeted where improvement is most needed
- ensure that Ofsted’s work has even greater impact
- enable Ofsted to report more effectively on key themes.

Inspection thus embodies and enacts the core virtues of New Public Management, bringing about economy, efficiency and effectiveness, thus ensuring value for money while being user-centred. In most of these documents that publicise Ofsted’s role and purpose, inspection is recurrently articulated in this series of keywords that represent a largely standardised corporate managerial discourse that has been naturalised since the 1990s. Organisations – including public organisations – appear to be discursively isomorphic, interpellated through a language in which self-representation must be expressed. This frequently means that public service organisations often represent themselves with reference to internal reports and inquiries into their efficiency; such reports perpetuating dominant institutional norms and understandings. This is particularly true of Ofsted which draws mainly on evidence produced in house in order to justify their continued existence and methods (see, for example, Ofsted 2003, 2004; Ofsted 2008).

Finally, it is significant that improvement is understood as something that can be measured, observed and evaluated in terms of achieved performance but is also conceptualised in terms of a school’s “capacity for improvement”. Ofsted suggests that “The capacity to make further improvement is a judgement about the ability of a provider to continue to improve standards and make progress based on what it has accomplished so far, or to maintain exceptionally high standards” (Ofsted 2009b, 6). Questions of ‘capacity’ have become increasingly central to models of organisational evaluation and development since the 1990s. It is the term that articulates the concern with performance with the concern for future performance (or further

improvement). In some respects, it seems to be the most critical part of evaluation – performance by itself is no longer enough: the promise of a better performance is also required. And identifying capacity is (as Ofsted recognises) a matter of *judgement*. Capacity is not directly visible in measurable/data-driven evidence, but requires an assessment of organisational culture and leadership (e.g., in terms of ‘ambition and prioritisation?’). However, Ofsted also warns that judgements of “capacity for improvement” demand careful evaluation and should not be read off from superficial indications:

Inspectors should seek evidence of the impact of improvements implemented by the provider as shown in its track record and performance since the last visit by inspectors. Good intentions and an aspirational outlook, or a recent change in management or leadership following a period of ineffective leadership, do not in themselves provide sufficient proof of the capacity to achieve improvement (Ofsted 2009b, 6).

There is more that might be said about how ‘capacity’ is understood and assessed, not least in terms of its links to the discourse of ‘leadership’ that came to prominence in public services during the last two decades (see, for example, O’Reilly and Reed 2010, on ‘leaderism’). Ofsted’s references to capacity up until 2012 were linked primarily to the performance of the senior leadership team, with considerable emphasis on the ‘charismatic’ model of leadership alluded to by Bush and Middlewood (2013). But since then, a focus on distributed leadership combined with an ever more politically driven focus on school governors (largely due to their increased responsibilities in relation to the academy programme) has added new inferences to the term ‘capacity to improve’ (see Baxter 2013).

## **Inspection, Accountability and Independence**

The discourse of inspection at Ofsted is associated with a powerful theme of accountability, one that is also linked to the rise of New Public Management. In older models of Inspection in England, standards (involving the delivery of an ‘efficient’ education) were tied to three different versions of accountability. The first was ‘Probity’ (the assessment of the proper use of public funds in the discharge of public purposes, embodied in the figures of the district auditor and town clerk); the second was ‘Professionalism’ (embodied in the HMI and other advisors integrally linked to the teaching profession); and the third was ‘Accountability’ understood in a political register (the responsibility of elected representatives, either in local government or parliament). Following the NPM tidal wave of the 1980s, accountability was reconfigured to focus on organisations, to become performance-centred, to produce an ‘arm’s length’ between political representatives and public service providers, and to become part of what Clarke (2005a) calls the “competitive-evaluative nexus”. In the process, accountability was recast as a managerial problem and practice, becoming increasingly linked to performance evaluation techniques



and technologies and performance management. While this new articulation of accountability certainly included versions of probity (such as the demand for public resources to be spent effectively; see below), it challenged the closures of professionalism, and changed the relationship between politics and service provision. It has been articulated internationally as part of the conception of 'good governance' in which accountability, transparency, participation and performance are combined (see Newman and Clarke 2009, 100–102).

Accountability, when translated into technologies and practices of inspection and audit, became entangled with notions of independence (Clarke 2005b). This is an Ofsted keyword, recurrently asserted: "We prize our independence and we report impartially" (Ofsted 2009, 2). It is sometimes rephrased: "We will report the outcomes of inspection and regulation without fear or favour" (Ofsted 2009b, 5); or Inspectors will "evaluate objectively, be impartial and inspect without fear or favour" (Ofsted 2009b, 21). This is a combative view of independence: the avoidance of 'fear or favour' is interesting, but it is not clear where the problems of fear or favour have arisen that demand this assertion: when or where were HMIs suspected of fear or favour? There are two issues about independence: the first concerns from what or whom is Ofsted independent? The implication here seems to be that Ofsted must be independent of the schools they inspect. But to what extent is Ofsted independent of other sources of influence: the government; contemporary trends in thinking about schooling; international trends in policy and practice? The second question concerns how this independence of judgement is to be secured: which sorts of practices ensure Ofsted's independence? Ofsted identifies a series of devices as the basis for establishing and ensuring the independence of inspection. Ofsted stresses the importance of "Consistent and coherent inspection and regulation methodologies" (Ofsted 2009b, 1). The work of inspection must ensure that inspectors:

- make clear and transparent judgements based on sound evidence
- inspect and report with integrity
- have clear success criteria, procedures and guidance (Ofsted 2009b, 3).

There is a code of conduct for Inspectors that requires inspectors to:

- evaluate objectively, be impartial and inspect without fear or favour
- evaluate provision in line with frameworks, national standards or requirements
- base all evaluations on clear and robust evidence
- have no connection with the provider which could undermine their objectivity
- report honestly and clearly, ensuring that judgements are fair and reliable
- (Ofsted 2009b, 21).

This is a powerful cluster of virtues: objective, impartial, without fear or favour; clear and robust evidence; honesty; fair and reliable judgements. Indeed, it is such a powerful cluster that we are tempted to ask: which doubts, anxieties or concerns are being addressed through this insistence on the comprehensively independent character of inspection?

## **Inspection and Users**

As we noted earlier, the commitment to producing Value for Money is central to Ofsted's articulation of the task of inspection: schools must deliver 'Efficiency and Effectiveness'. These terms formed the core of the new managerialist challenge to the professional bureaucracies of public services and have been embodied in a variety of devices, practices and apparatuses: from audit, through 'market testing', to New Labour's "Best Value". In the original incarnation of 'Value for Money', there were three E's: economy was aligned alongside efficiency and effectiveness. Now it seems that Value For Money embraces the commitment to economy without it being stated explicitly. Ofsted offers its own definition of Value for Money that indicates just how closely the three terms are entwined:

In the context of inspection and regulation, value for money is either the efficiency and effectiveness with which a provider uses the available resources to meet the needs of its users or, where more information is available regarding the amount and allocation of resources, the efficiency and effectiveness with which the provider uses and manages the available resources to meet the needs of its users and achieve high-quality outcomes (Ofsted 2009c, 17).

What marks this articulation of Value for Money as slightly different from the original NPM version is the insertion of the conception of meeting "the needs of its users" into the mix. Indeed, Ofsted insists on connecting Value For Money and users in at least two ways:

- Views of users should be taken into account when evaluating value for money.
- The judgement on value for money must be clear, transparent and understandable to users and stakeholders (Ofsted 2009c, 17).

The idea of Users seems to play an absolutely central role in organising Ofsted's discourse of inspection: references to users, their needs and the need to engage or consult them appear everywhere in Ofsted documents. For example, "Ofsted puts children and learners first" (2009a, 2); the principles of inspection and regulation "focus on the interests of service users children, young people, parents and carers, adult learners and employers – and promote improvement in the services we inspect

or regulate” (Ofsted 2009b, 3); while Ofsted has a “Focus on the needs of users” and promises to

- take account of users’ views when we plan and carry out inspections
- draw on users’ views to inform our judgements and the outcomes of inspection
- encourage providers to focus on the needs of users (Ofsted 2009b, 3).

Inspectors are expected to “act in the best interests and well-being of service users” (Ofsted 2009b, 21). There are some interesting variations around the identification of users: sometimes Ofsted talks about “children and learners”; at other points more diverse groups are identified: “Users are defined as children and young people, parents and carers, adult learners and employers” (Ofsted 2009b, 16). This is an interesting list, not least for the way that it compounds (without comment) quite different senses of ‘use’. It might be argued that ‘users’ have become central to a ‘reformed’ version of New Public Management: they are not exactly the market-based model of consumers associated with the first generation version, although they still bear some of its traces, especially in relation to parents as school choosers. Instead, ‘users’ are imagined to have needs, views, experiences and voices and they must be represented in the processes of public service evaluation. They also need to be represented *by* evaluators/inspectors. Indeed, inspection gains legitimacy by representing user interests and articulating user voices – *against* providers who cannot be trusted to know and meet user needs (this is the legacy of public choice theory, see O’Neill 2002).

Although it is not the focus of this article, we are interested in how such ‘users’ are brought to voice. Ofsted uses devices such as questionnaires issued to parents, discussions with pupils or school meetings during inspection. But it perhaps matters whether they are brought to voice through a form of social research (is there systematic sampling of pupils for instance?), or whether these processes more resemble a form of customer satisfaction surveying. We are also interested in how such voices come to play a part in the judgements of inspection: how they are ‘taken account of’, and what part they may play in written reports. In a study of Best Value audits, Humphrey (2002; 2003) argued that short quotations from users were often used to authenticate judgements and add texture or colour to reports. Elsewhere we have explored the practices of enrolling ‘ordinary people’ in governmental strategies, in particular the techniques of ventriloquising popular voices in policy-making as means of bridging the gap between the governmental and the everyday languages of policy and public services (Clarke 2010). We intend to return to this issue in future work.

## **The Coalition government and the future of inspection**

In this final section, we consider the impact of the Coalition government’s reform of education on some of the keywords of inspection. From the outset, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010–2015) identified the reform of education as a

political priority. The claim to be liberating schools from excessive state control, particularly in the form of the Academy Programme (Parliament 2010; House of Commons Education Committee 2011), has been accompanied by a redefinition of the role of Ofsted and the practice of inspection. We think the reforms have both established new keywords and re-articulated others, inflecting their established meanings in new ways. At the core of the Coalition's view of publicly funded schooling is the commitment to promote 'autonomy' and 'freedom'. Schools have to achieve specified standards or performance levels, but how they achieve them should be a matter of choice for schools: "As long as schools provide a good education, we will not mandate specific approaches" (DFE 2010, para. 7.6). Under New Labour, this view of autonomy was sometimes referred to as "earned autonomy" in other public services, but the Coalition view of liberated schools seems to stretch further towards a presumption of autonomy as the system norm.

The reform of the school system was accompanied by changes in Ofsted's role expressed in a new Inspection Framework, implemented in January 2012 and amended in September of the same year, which focused the practice of inspection on four key judgements (Ofsted 2012a, 2012c, 2012d). The judgements reflected the current political focus on teaching and learning, which even organises judgements within the leadership and management category. In keeping with the commitment to autonomy, the Coalition emphasised that inspection must be "proportionate": "Ofsted will adopt a highly proportionate approach to inspection" (DFE 2010, para. 6.21) releasing outstanding schools from the burden of inspection but intensifying inspection for weaker/inadequate schools. It implies a process of increasing differentiation between schools. This conception of 'proportionate' did exist in the Ofsted vocabulary (see Ofsted 2009b, 3), but it appears to be occupying a more significant place in this re-structuring of inspection. However, the meaning of 'proportionate' in terms of the new framework is an interesting one: the earlier commitment to reduced re-inspection for outstanding schools has been qualified by a number of provisos: for example, parents and governors may call for an inspection should they deem it necessary. Withdrawal of regular inspections has had considerable implications for schools that see their 'outstanding' badge as a marketing tool; however, prospective parents may demand when the school last earned this judgement. The term proportionate seems to be undergoing a re-definition, stretching to accommodate any type of inspection that falls outside of the normal cyclical rotation.

Other keywords persist, but again appear to be subject to reworking: for example, accountability and independence:

Along with making information and data about schools publicly available, the publication of inspection reports is an important part of making schools accountable to parents. Ofsted remains a highly respected part of the education system. The robust independent challenge of inspection can confirm school self-evaluation, boost staff morale and stimulate further improvement (DFE 2010, para 6.16).

Here accountability is specifically about parents; elsewhere, it involves multiple audiences: taxpayers, parents, pupils and communities, for example (para 6.1). Both taxpayers and communities appear as new reference points for accountability. So too do school governors whose role has come under increasing scrutiny following a recent Parliamentary inquiry (Parliament 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), prompted by a number of high profile cases in which governors were deemed accountable for school failure. This use of accountability has become integrally linked to the government's academy and free school policies. It has become a media refrain in terms of ensuring that, in the face of opposition to changes of school status, the public is made aware that free schools and academies are highly accountable to both public and government. In terms of Ofsted's own media strategy, the term has become synonymous with the inspectorate's ability to control school performance in the face of a barrage of bad publicity concerning the apparent lack of accountability of newly autonomous schools (Ofsted 2013). Very often accountability is primarily understood as being organised through the production and dissemination of data:

In creating a more autonomous school system, we will reduce duties, requirements and guidance on all schools, and make sure that every school can, over time, enjoy the freedoms that Academies currently have. We will dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance. We will instead make direct accountability more meaningful, making much more information about schools available in standardised formats to enable parents and others to assess and compare their performance. And, through freeing up the system, we will increase parents' ability to make meaningful choices about where to send their children to school (DFE 2010, para 6.2).

Here we begin to see a map of a system constructed around autonomised schools, understood as free from central direction and local (political) control, but framed as a bilateral relationship between the authority of the Secretary of State and the leadership of individual schools. It poses interesting questions about the place and role of Ofsted in governing such a loosely coupled system. Under a new Chief Inspector, Ofsted has begun to identify some new directions alongside the revised – and more tightly focused – model of inspections that began in 2012. It has identified a central role for parents as the users/consumers of schooling, embodied in a virtual parental evaluation system through a link called Parent View (launched 20.10.2011), an online questionnaire that will allow parents and carers to give their views on their child's school. Ofsted claims that “Covering over 22,000 schools across England, the 12-question survey will help other parents as they make important choices about their child's education and provide Ofsted with information about schools that will help inform priorities for inspection” (<http://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/>). Ofsted has invited parents to embed this link in their own blogs and webpages in order to spread its use.

Other changes in Ofsted have produced new versions of existing inspection discourse, not least the terms in which inspection judgements are framed. Sir Michael Wilshaw, formerly head teacher of Mossbourne Academy, became the new Chief Inspector in October 2011. BBC News reported on his appointment as follows:

Sir Michael has told the BBC he is prepared to shake up England's schools and that he will not tolerate any school being given an Ofsted rating of 'outstanding' unless it achieves outstanding academic results. Currently, some schools can be awarded the top rating even if pupils only achieve average results. Sir Michael also said he wanted to challenge schools to do better because the UK was falling behind comparable nations in international league tables (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-15294805>).

In 2012, along with changes to the inspection framework, he further reformed the classification system for school grading by abolishing the "Satisfactory" grade, and replacing it with the category "Requires Improvement".

Ahead of a government summit on 'coasting schools' to be held at Downing Street later today, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has confirmed his intention to scrap the 'satisfactory' judgment for school inspections. The move is designed to tackle the number of coasting schools that have remained stubbornly 'satisfactory' over a number of inspections, as highlighted in Ofsted's Annual Reports over recent years. The proposals, which will be subject to consultation, would mean that any school that does not provide a good standard of education will be given a new 'requires improvement' grade (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/ofsted-announces-scrapping-of-'satisfactory'-judgement-move-designed-help-improve-education-for-mill>).

The importance of Improvement as a keyword is underscored both by the change and the commitment to inspect for improvement that underlies it. In this respect, the new Chief Inspector seems committed to maintaining, or possibly enhancing, a combative approach to schools and teachers (also see the TES article: "New Ofsted chief fires warning shots" at <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6145814>). This reassertion of an abrasive relationship to schools and teachers – underlining the 'independence' of Ofsted's judgements, perhaps – is articulated through an imagery of Ofsted as the representative of parents and pupils whose needs or desires are threatened by underperforming schools and teachers.

The study of keywords has revealed some significant shifts and continuities in understandings and usage of words that are used by the inspectorate to describe the inspection process. It has revealed ways in which the changing political climate and contexts in which education is situated have an impact on normative understandings of particular words. These words are not only used within official documentation, but are also taken up by the media and used in ways that reflect their diachronically changing inflections. These inflections colour and code new discourses of quality in education rendering the strange, familiar; their inferred values and orientations aim to construct a bond between the inspectorate and publics.

As Williams warned, apparent continuities in keywords may conceal changing usage and new inflections and connections between words and this analytic orientation can help us to explore for the ways in which the inspectorate constructs itself as the only constant reference point in a changing education landscape. The subtle shifts in terminology hidden from the public eye help the inspectorate to effect considerable changes in education policy and practices whilst appearing the only constant: the voice of (independent) reason in a highly politicised and turbulent educational climate. We conclude that Williams' conception of keywords provides a productive approach in the analysis of institutional and political discourse. In employing this approach, we are able to more readily discern the ways in which normative understandings of key terms enable them to retain their influence whilst enabling barely perceptible changes in education policy and practice.

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